Enactment and communicative competence in aphasia

A functional linguistic perspective

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BACKGROUND

Enactment, an identified communicative resource in aphasia, is a discourse phenomenon involving direct reported speech and/or gesture, body movement, prosody to depict scenes or events (e.g., Wilkinson et al., 2010).

Conversational assertiveness is a prominent aspect of communicative competence, hence important for people with aphasia to develop/maintain. It entails capacities such as initiating topics, expressing opinions and feelings, challenging other speakers, and making requests (Merrill et al., 2015; Richmond & McCroskey, 1985).

RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent does enactment contribute to conversational assertiveness in everyday interactions involving people with aphasia?

METHODS

MATERIALS

Five video-recorded everyday interactions between P (50-year-old man with moderate conduction aphasia) and his wife M (Fig. 1), drawn from AphasiaBank (MacWhinney et al., 2011) and collected by Oelschlager & Damico (1998). Each recording had a duration between 22-53 minutes.

Figure 1. Still taken from one of the interactions between P (left) and M.

PROCEDURES

1. Division of transcripts into moves: semantically distinguished discourse units that fulfil a particular function such as agreeing, disagreeing, elaborating or countering.

2. Move coding using an adapted version of the Speech Function Network (Fig. 2). This process reveals patterns of initiating/responding and supporting/confronting. This reveals insights into how participants explore, adjust, and negotiate alignments and differences in meanings conveyed.

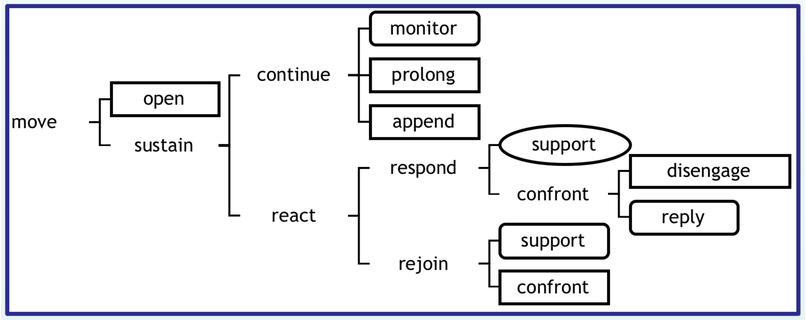

Figure 2. Adapted SFL-framework (Eggins & Slade, 2004). Rectangles represent assertive moves, rounded rectangles represent neutral moves, oval represents deferential moves (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985; Eggins & Slade, 2004)

3. Move labelling in terms of conversational assertiveness (see shapes used in Fig. 2).

4. Enactment identification based on verbal (e.g., person reference and/or reporting verb), paralinguistic (e.g., intonation shift) and non-verbal (e.g., shift in gesturing style) markers (e.g., Lind, 2002; Groenewold et al., 2014).

5. Examination of relationship between enactment and conversational assertiveness. Hereto, the distribution over the three levels of conversational assertiveness (assertive, neutral, deferential, Fig. 2) was compared between enactments and non-enactments.

RESULTS

- Total: 2811 moves (P: *n*=1242; M: *n*=1569)
- Assertive moves: P < M (44% vs. 56%)
- P: ≈5% enactment moves
- M: ≈1% enactment moves
- P's assertive moves: enactments > non-enactments (*n*=43/58 and *n*=501/1184, respectively)
- Relationship between enactment and conversational assertiveness for P ($p<0.001$), not for M ($p>0.05$) (Fig 3)

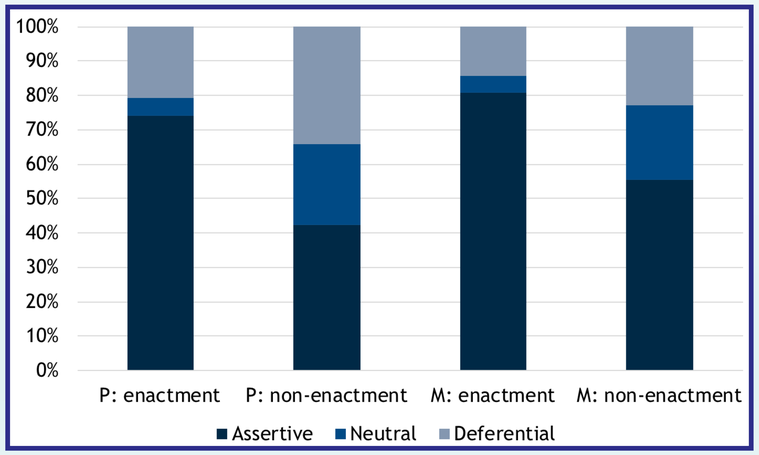

Figure 3. Distribution over assertiveness categories for enactments and non-enactments produced by both speakers

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Enactment can be a device that enables PWA to be more assertive in everyday interaction. This is in line with previous research indicating that enactment allows PWA to reveal communicative competences that otherwise would remain hidden (e.g., Groenewold et al., 2014), resonating Holland's axiomatic suggestion that speakers with aphasia "communicate better than they talk" (Holland, 1977: 173).

Outcomes support a functional therapy approach, in which attention is paid to using strategies which compensate for language impairments rather than focusing on deficits.

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